



Moon, Michael. Disseminating Whitman: Revision and Corporeality in "Leaves of Grass" [review]

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1856, and 1860 poems so innovative and that Whitman no longer sought to make poetry out of "two souls interchanging."

By way of a coda, Greenspan again poses the question of Whitman's "you." Goodness knows, Whitman's "I" (personal, historic, mythic, etc.) is problem enough for most critics. His "you" (the *en masse*, the individual reader, the idealized reader, the personality of the future, etc.) is at least as tantalizing. For starters, the English word "you" is neither singular or plural, but ambiguous. And Greenspan argues that Whitman's mastery and exploitation of this ambiguity is one of his great triumphs. The ingenious complexity of the "I-you" relationship which Greenspan propounds should be reckoned with by anyone who would interpret Whitman's poems afresh.

Greenspan's foreshortening of Whitman's literary history deprives the reader of some potentially astute insights into the later poetry and prose. In some of his readings, the reader-response approach overbalances the historicism. Because Greenspan does not conceive of Whitman as a "political" poet, for example, he appears to scant the political relevance of some of Whitman's poems. But, on balance, he has made a noteworthy and challenging contribution to Whitman scholarship, bringing fresh interpretations to many of the poems, to our understanding of Whitman's intentions, and to the concept of Whitman as a print-oriented artist. Greenspan's reader-related approach to Whitman is paralleled by his approach to his own reader: *Walt Whitman and the American Reader* encourages us to enter into a fruitful dialogue with its author.

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MICHAEL MOON. *Disseminating Whitman: Revision and Corporeality in "Leaves of Grass."* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991. x + 249 pp. \$32.50.

Not everyone will welcome the publication of Michael Moon's *Disseminating Whitman*. Some will be offended by its dustjacket, which depicts three and a half photographs of nude men identified as "Thomas Eakins and another man, 1883." Others will find the use of "disseminating" in the title unnecessarily vulgar. Specific scholars will probably not like the way Moon refers impolitely to their work on Whitman, especially Arthur Golden, who is described as "imperceptive (and/or homophobic) to ignore the phallo-anal language" Whitman is alleged to use in an early and recently discovered letter. M. Jimmie Killingsworth's "Whitman and Motherhood" is described as a "rather superficial survey." Both articles, incidentally, appeared in *American Literature*, where Moon, an assistant professor at Duke, has just been named Associate Editor. Gay Wilson Allen, one of Duke's most distinguished alumni and a recipient of its honorary degree, is taken to task for his *New Walt Whitman Handbook* (1975), which Moon deems "useful, if somewhat impressionistic." He also dismisses Allen's essay, "Whitman and Stoicism," as "typical of the simplistic notion of the significance of stoicism for Whitman's writing." Fortunately,

William Douglas O'Connor, Whitman's friend and author of *The Good Gray Poet* (1866), was never to know that he was to be remembered as "William Van O'Connor" (p. 240).

Moon's book, of course, is by the nature of its argument polemical and has other fish to fry than Whitman's reputation as a poet. Robert K. Martin in *The Homosexual Tradition in American Poetry* (1979) faced the same situation, but he was mainly battling the critical tradition that addressed Whitman's possible homosexuality as a pathology and something separate from his greatness as a poet. By comparison, Moon's condemnations of other critics seem petty and gratuitous. His general target is the culture that values "the literary in and for itself, in isolation from the political and sexual-political desires." Whereas Martin sought to demonstrate that Whitman's sexual orientation was part—and an important part—of what made *Leaves of Grass* great literature, Moon argues that its importance—at least in the first four editions which he discusses—lies in the fact that it was a political act in which the poet wished "to disseminate affectionate physical presence." Both scholars object to the marginalization of homosexuality and thus to the argument held even by many of those who are not morally opposed to the gay lifestyle that sexual orientation is a private matter, not a literary or political concern. In a real sense, Martin and Moon are waging the battle that Whitman fought in the nineteenth century against the belief that (hetero)sexual topics did not belong in literature. Today it is the homosexual topic, and thus this great American poet *must* be gay in order for them as critics to come in from the margins of a "homophobic" culture. Whether Whitman *was* gay will continue to be debated by the "politically incorrect," even in the old liberal tradition of biographers Allen and Justin Kaplan. The first, writing in the 1950s, hedged his bet and called Whitman "homoeoteric"; the second, working in the 1970s, wrote about Whitman as if it did not matter that much that Whitman was gay. The implied (homophobic?) argument here is that the undue focus on the poet's sexual orientation trivializes the subject; the counter-argument is that (homo)sexuality is at the center of human creativeness. Hence, we are dealing with a political difference, but not necessarily *not* a literary one if we accept the current notion that everything is political, even literature. Most of the dissenters to this creed would not deny the political nature of literature; they would simply argue that it is at best indirect and sublimated. Those of the other school see the purely (or only slightly political) literary as the result of the "privatizing, standardizing, domesticizing, misogynist, and homophobic social arrangements of industrial, commercial, and (in the post-Civil War era) corporate capitalism" (Moon, p. 10). With regard to homosexuality, seen as only one aspect of the post-Vietnam Era reform, it may come down to the "homophobes" against the "heterophobes," the first standing for such treacheries as individualism and capitalism, the second for such gayeties as group individualism and measured Marxism.

For Moon, the body is the text, and the text is the body. Whitman sought to use the text as a medium through which he could pass his bodily presence (including, metaphorically, "semitic" fluids) to the male reader, who in turn could—to put it as bluntly as this book deserves—masturbate metaphorically back to the poet. Hence, the use of "corporeality" in the subtitle. As to the use of "revision," Moon means not exactly textual revision (otherwise, he could not

apply the term very clearly to the first edition) but “macro-revision” in which he could launch his “corporeal-utopian program.” *Leaves of Grass*, therefore, was the work of cultural reform in which the poet cleverly and strategically tried to represent “the body and sexuality, especially sexuality between and among males.” Women are not completely included in this readerly exchange because they are obviously not as important to the poet as male readers. Even the Twenty-ninth Bather turns out to be male because the narrator of the poem appropriates the woman’s position for his own: “Leaving her standing at her window, he passes from one of its sides to the other on the energy of her desire, as it were.” Moon’s commentary contains more than a couple of such qualifying clauses and phrases as he finds homosexual imagery in almost everything in Whitman he surveys. Yet I found him interesting in his challenge to the poet’s claim to be “the poet of the woman the same as the man.” Noting the subsequent two lines from “Song of Myself” which conclude with the idea that “there is nothing greater than the mother of men,” Moon observes that this statement undercuts the “proposed equivalencies by skewing them in the third line into a hierarchial structure which privileges ‘the mother of men.’” In saying the mother of men are the greatest, Whitman devalues both women who are not mothers and women who are mothers of women. Of course, one could respond that the ultimate celebration of mothers of men also devalues men and even fathers of men—that everybody is equally subordinate to the mother of men. There is also the possibility that “men” is not “gender-specific” but generic. Moon’s point, however, is that the mother is most valuable when she produces a male (who is first “shaped in the woman”). Once so shaped, he can celebrate himself through autoerotic and homosexual activity. In this regard, he points to Section 44 of “Song of Myself” where the poet indulges in a “representative moment of male self-instantiation . . . first by saluting his own phallus and then being engulfed by the press of ‘lovers’ to ‘touch’ him.” This is the interpretation for the last two lines of Section 44:

All forces have been steadily employed to complete and delight me,
Now I stand on this spot with my soul.

I have always found this section so moving as a description of the poet’s claim to immortality that I never really focused on the fact that in the very next section he is talking about manhood and lovers suffocating him. With the beginning of a new section, we would expect a slightly different topic, but in the 1855 edition (which Moon quotes throughout, calling the poem by its first original line “I celebrate myself”), there is no break.

Even though Whitman added one when he divided the poem into fifty-two sections in 1860, this might have been the same kind of concealment of homosexual imagery that Moon also finds in “The Child and the Prolifigate,” one of the poet’s earliest short stories and (according to Moon) paradigmatic of the poet’s use of metonymy to advance his “oral-anal” program. Originally published as “The Child’s Champion” in 1841 and revised and reissued in 1844 and 1847, this temperance story about a fatherless apprentice was further revised and included under the apologetic heading of “Pieces in Early Youth” in *Specimen Days and Collect* (1882). When Thomas L. Brasher in his modern

edition of *The Early Poems and the Fiction* (1963) used the final version with notes indicating earlier passages and changes, he described it as part of "Whitman's efforts to please the reading public's taste for the sentimental, the didactic, and the gothic." In surely the most imaginative reading we now have, Moon sees the story as the future poet's subversive attempt to present "proscribed meanings about power relations, including sexual relations, between men in his culture." Using the Brasher edition, Moon sometimes forces his reading by slipping in paraphrases presented as direct quotations and choosing passages from the version that best suits his argument: that the drunken sailor in trying to force the boy to have a drink "on him" (not in any of the texts) is actually imaged as trying to "fellate" the boy and that Langton, the young man who intervenes for the boy, is actually drawn to him sexually. What Whitman revised out of the earliest version of the story were instances of what his reading audience would have viewed as romanticized expressions of male bonding and a scene in which the young man and the boy share—not unusual before the fear of being accused of that love "that dare not speak its name"—the same bed. The poet was not smart enough for the twentieth century and its gay critics, however, because Moon finds as much of the story's homosexual imagery in the final version. In one sense, he therefore tends to undercut his thesis that Whitman was covering up between the early editions and the last one (by seeing in the sailor's forcing the child to drink a sublimated instance of sodomy). Yet the excisions do suggest that Whitman was probably concerned about the imagery and that the revision was political rather than literary. In other words, he feared that the imagery in the original and earlier versions of his story would be taken by later readers exactly the way Moon interprets it today. Revising in the early 1880s (Symonds had begun his troublesome requests for Walt's explanation of "athletic friendship" in 1872) the version he probably hoped would be the only one to survive, he could not have foreseen (before the term "homosexual" was coined) that his homoerotic imagery would be an asset in the twentieth century. Indeed, it was largely because of the inference it spawned that CBS televised in 1976 the prime-time "Song of Myself," an hour-long docudrama starring Rip Torn as the homosexual Walt.

Thus the Whitman that Moon desires was "disseminated" among commercials for deodorants and dishsoaps—probably when Moon was in junior high school. Moon's title, *Disseminating Whitman*, reflects his grown-up desire to carry the message into the criticism. In a way he is picking up his poet's program, which underwent several adjustments in the first four editions and then settled into the kind of revision associated with textual instead of sexual matters. He has revised Whitman back from his "definitive" 1882 edition, where the concealment was intended not to advance his homosexuality but to moderate it for public consumption. Taken on its own premises with its neo-Marxist paradigms and theoretical borrowings, the book is a good performance—articulate and even artful.